

Foreword *

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Why is the *Mishkan Le'Omanut* museum in Kibbutz Ein Harod exhibiting works by the Swiss artist Otto Wyler? What interest could an Israeli museum in the Jezreel Valley have in an artist like Otto Wyler (1887-1965) who lived most of his life in the Swiss town of Aarau?¹

¹
The capital of the Northern Swiss canton of Aargau, situated west of Zurich.

In her book *Our Life Requires Art* the *Mishkan Le'Omanut*'s director, Galia Bar Or, quotes the museum's founder, Haim Aptekar Atar as saying during W.W. II: "We must save Jewish art in the same way that we must save Jewish souls." Atar was deeply concerned with the fate of Europe's Jewish cultural treasures. He asserted that, "You can't produce spirituality from rocky soil," and that the new Israeli culture must broaden its perspectives by studying the creative struggles of Jews in the Diaspora. Atar's mission, which has become our mission, was to search the world's museums and art centers for the works of Jewish artists who are little known in Israel and to collect and exhibit them here in Ein Harod.² This collection of 19th and early 20th century art is the foundation upon which the museum's collection is built.

²
Bar Or, Galia, *Life requires art: Art Museums in the Kibbutzim, 1930-1960*, The Ben Gurion Research Institute, 2010, p. 167

Yehuda Sprecher is an architect and grandson of Otto Wyler; he designed the milking parlors for Ein Harod's dairy farm. Yehuda and his wife Orit, became acquainted with the museum and its mission while visiting the kibbutz, and he eventually partnered with Galia Bar Or to explore the possibility of producing an Otto Wyler show at the *Mishkan Le'Omanut*. The museum had never exhibited Jewish art from Switzerland. Yehuda's mother, Zimira Wyler Sprecher, was very eager to have her father's work brought to Israel. Her lucid recollections of the course of her father's artistic career have been an invaluable resource for the research behind the exhibition. The museum's mission converged with the Sprecher family's commitment to produce this show.

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Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "Aargau".

Otto Wyler was the son of Emma Guggenheim from St. Gallen and Raphael Wyler, who began his life in Endingen, one of the two Swiss townships (the other one being Lengnau) where Jews were first allowed to reside in the early 18th century. The Swiss waited until 1878 to establish full religious freedom with the ratification of the confederal constitution,³ making Switzerland one of the last Western European countries to grant

Jews emancipation. Until that time Swiss Jews were second class citizens and young Raphael was proud to be one of the first Jews accepted into the Swiss military. (Later, the army found it difficult to supply uniforms large enough to fit his unusually tall frame and consequently excused Raphael from military service). Many Jews left Endingen after they were permitted to live elsewhere in Switzerland. While the Wylers were well established in that town, they moved from Endingen to Mumpf in the early 1880's and from there to Lenzburg. They eventually settled in Aarau where they joined several other Jewish families. The few Jews of Aarau lacked a synagogue, rabbi, or Hebrew school to unite them, but they formed a close-knit community none-the-less. Zimira Wyler Sprecher tells me that the Jewish families constituted a kind of informal mutual loan society; such loans enabled the Wylers to buy a house and a shop in the town. The elder Wylers belonged to an exclusively Jewish social circle and Zimira remembers eating Passover matza in her grandfather's house, which was full of Jewish books. Raphael frequented Zurich to attend synagogue services, and Zimira also visited a synagogue on Yom Kippur. The town of St. Gallen boasted an active synagogue and Jewish community, and Zimira sometimes visited her aunts and cousins who lived there.⁴ She also recalls her grandfather's account of lectures delivered in St. Gallen by a fellow named Theodore Herzl.

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She was eventually married under a chuppah in the St. Gallen Synagogue.

Raphael Wyler's upbringing had been shaped by Endingen's organized Jewish community, but given Aarau's lack of Jewish institutions it fell to him to personally impart Jewish values to his children. Thus, Otto Wyler grew up in a home that was Jewish but he never received a formal Jewish education. Otto's early life was disrupted at the age of thirteen when he underwent the difficult surgical removal of a tumor from his brain. The operation prevented him from travelling to Baden where he would otherwise have studied for his bar mitzvah as his brother had before him. Wyler's doctors believed Otto had suffered some brain damage, an opinion which prevented him from continuing high school. In 1903 he decided to study design with the hope of specializing in theatre design. His teachers were so impressed by his talent that they recommended his parents send him to the prestigious *Ecole des Beaux Art* in Paris where he could study painting. At the *Ecole* he studied under Fernand Cormon, who encouraged his students to paint in a manner which would gain them favor with the *Salon*. Wyler continued to paint after returning to Aarau and in 1913 he won a gold medal at the 2nd International Exhibition in Munich. In 1917 he married Betty Jaeger; they had four children;

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Details of Otto Wyler's biography are drawn from the catalogue of the exhibition at Aargauer Kunsthhaus, Aarau on Dec. 1962-Jan. 1963. The article was written by Guido Fisher.

Zimira, Beate, Oswald and Lotti. Lotti, the youngest daughter, became a painter as well. Wyler was a great traveler, enjoying lengthy visits to Paris, Munich, the South of France, Morocco, Greece, Italy, and Israel.⁵ He was energized by these travels and incorporated the novel styles and techniques of foreign lands in his work after returning to Aarau.

Wyler was a true student of all the great European artists. At times he experimented with Impressionism and Expressionism, and many of his works were informed by the Fauvists. He was influenced by Picasso, Matisse, and the *Jugendstil* movement and much of his work was based on the ideals of *Les Nabis*. Wyler deliberately held no allegiance to one particular style; it was the art of painting itself that intrigued and energized him. He painted the landscapes which he found inspiring; among his favorites were views of the rugged Swiss Alps as they passed through the seasons of the year. Whenever Wyler traveled he painted scenes of his new surroundings. He produced portraits of all his family members and of Aarau's familiar personalities. Otto's nudes and floral still lives echo the various periods of modern art history, and his many paintings of Aarau give us a real sense of that city. Wyler never produced historical or action paintings; in almost every case technique and color harmony triumphed over subject matter.

Before long, Otto Wyler became Aarau's "town painter" and today one can find his works in almost every local public building. Aarau serves as capital city to the Canton of Aargau, and a huge Wyler painting of a harvest scene features prominently in the canton's parliament building. Other publicly displayed works range from a large mosaic in the local crematorium, to frescoes on the walls of several local institutions, paintings in the school gym, and smaller works which decorate the walls of various nursing homes. The county jail, police station, banks, post office, hospitals, Albert Einstein building⁶ and of course the art museum all display Wyler's work. His paintings appear in all the corners of Aarau; the storefront window of a book shop sports a large poster reproducing Wyler's portrait of his wife as she read.

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In 1895 Albert Einstein spent his last year of secondary school in Aarau and he is counted among the town's celebrated residents.

Wyler is simply part of the city's DNA. His works captured the mood of the city as it passed through the year's seasons and local festivals. The *Maienzug* is Aarau's most important town holiday; it takes place every year on the first Friday in July, marking the end of the school year. The festivities reach their highlight with a procession of school children - girls dressed in white, crowned with floral wreaths and grasping bouquets in their hands - through the old town center. Wyler painted this celebration

many times and our exhibition contains three such works. The largest was produced in 1911^{p.40} and is usually on display in Aarau's school auditorium. Another large painting of the festival from 1912^{p.41} hangs in the main dining room of the Herosé Stift home for the aged, while the smaller 1935 *Aarau Street, with Flags*^{p.48} belongs to the town's archives.

Otto Wyler was a serious painter who adopted many of the various artistic fashions of the early 20th century that he came across in his travels, making them his own.

In 1987 he was honored with a 100th birthday exhibition. In the exhibition catalog it is written that he was a man open to new ideas and constantly aiming for perfection in his art. Wyler is quoted as saying: "My most beautiful paintings have yet to be painted."⁷ His passion for the art of painting never waned.

When I set out to research the work of Otto Wyler I hunted for a Jewish connection, perhaps a painting of a rabbi or a synagogue. There is only one such painting in his oeuvre, and it is displayed in this exhibition. The painting was produced in 1912 and it depicts the interior of the St. Gallen Synagogue.^{p.43} The synagogue was Moorish in style (an architectural fashion that took hold in Germany of the 1830's and remained quite popular with Jews across the world until World War I⁸) and the painting bears a close likeness to recent photographs of the building. It depicts a scene in which three men wearing top hats stand on the *Bima* and look out towards the congregation over an open Torah scroll, which rests on a traditional reading table. Their backs are turned to the ark. (This arrangement was typical of Swiss Reform synagogues). According to Wyler family lore, the *gabbai* (sexton) caught Otto making sketches for the painting in the synagogue on the high holyday of Yom Kippur and admonished him for his impiety. Otto responded that he was actually not a Jew, making his behavior permissible. The *gabbai* retorted that Wyler could not possibly be a gentile, since he possessed such an obviously Jewish nose.

This painting is completely atypical of Wyler's work. It is done in a Fauvist style, drawn simply and composed of small distorted forms and expressive, vibrantly colored brushstrokes.

A tight knot of black-clad worshippers congregates on the bottom left of the painting; their contrast to the brilliant red expanses of the synagogue interior generates a sense of anxiety and alienation. Here Wyler seems to make his only use of color for emotional effect in the manner of Fauvist and expressionist painters. Only in this painting of a synagogue

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Otto Wyler, 30 March 1887-18 March 1965, 100 year retrospective exhibition at the Kunstkommission der Stadt Aarau und Aargauischer Kunstverein, 1987

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Ivan Davidson Kalmar "Moorish Style: Orientalism, the Jews, and Synagogue Architecture," *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring - Summer, 2001), p. 69

9

Nathan Ausubel,
*The Book of Jewish
Knowledge*, (New York:
Crown, 1968) p.139.

10

A few of Wyler's
paintings from the
Holocaust era use a
darker palette than do
his other depictions
of the same subjects.
Zimira Wyler Sprecher
told me in conversation
that during those years
he always had a packed
suitcase on hand just
in case he had to make
a quick exit. Wyler
remained in Aarau
throughout the war,
putting a temporary
stop to his artistic
travels.

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Thomas Fellner lives
in Zurich and is an
artist in his own
right. He paints Neo
Expressionist monsters
based on popular
culture. His mother is
the painter Lotti Fellner
Wyler, Otto's youngest
daughter.

does Wyler project feelings of insecurity and awkwardness. His work is usually bereft of humor or cynicism but here we find Wyler planting a caricatured rendering of a Jew, fully equipped with a long hooked nose, in the lower right corner of the painting. Perhaps that congregant was one of the Eastern European Jews who fled to Switzerland only to be received coolly by his "original Swiss" coreligionists.

The early synagogue scene of 1912 is unique in Wyler's oeuvre; he never returned to this "Jewish style" in his later paintings.

Like many of his contemporaries, Otto Wyler was a product of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*), a movement described by one of its leading thinkers, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) as granting Jews a chance to leave "the narrow labyrinth of ritual theological casuistry" and enter "the broad highway of human culture."⁹ Wyler never confronted the feelings of "otherness" and foreignness so typical of much Jewish art. His work expresses confident assimilation into the broader gentile community and it never smacks of Jewish angst. Wyler seems completely comfortable in his environment; he is a Jew who has found his home among the Swiss. Yet the painting of the synagogue naggingly suggests that reality may be less kind.¹⁰

On the last day of my trip to Aarau I had coffee with Otto Wyler's grandson¹¹ and I told him of my quest to find a Jewish angle in his grandfather's works. He reminded me that Otto Wyler's story reflects the craving of 20th century Jews to assimilate into the broader gentile community. Comfortable in his milieu, Wyler could concentrate on the important task of painting. Otto Wyler the Jew lived as a Swiss citizen struggling to attain a thoroughly secular aesthetic purity. That too is a Jewish story.